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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: BEYOND POLITICAL PARTIES, LITTLE INTEREST IN
UPCOMING ELECTIONS

REF: ALGIERS 619

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Going into the last week before the May 17 Algerian legislative elections, our sense is that political parties are flailing amidst widespread public disinterest. The head of the national election commission here told a government newspaper on May 9 that his commission is neither a police nor a judicial authority and cannot compel any government authority to do anything. The head of the largest Islamist party, the Movement for a Peaceful Society (in French, MSP) on May 8 accused the two main pro-government parties of preparing to rig the vote with local election administrators. Our limited sampling suggests most Algerians believe that their vote changes nothing and that the results are largely a foregone conclusion. Our contacts were more inclined to talk about the results of the French presidential election than the campaigns underway in their own country. Two stalwart business contacts compare the current Algerian political environment to the 1980s, but differ on whether today's political scene is better or worse by comparison. Political parties participating in the balloting, with the exception of the predominantly Berber Rally for Culture and Democracy Party, shy away from criticizing the electoral process. In an election where turnout is key for the performance of some parties more than others, the lack of voter enthusiasm is clear. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Said Bouchair, head of the Political Commission to Monitor Elections, told the government el-Moudjahid newspaper May 9 that his commission is neither a judicial institution able to take offenders to court nor an executive or police authority able to compel compliance with the law. Rather, he said, the commission's role was to raise violations of Algeria's election law with the proper Algerian authorities (in the Interior Ministry). In a May 7 interview with L'Expression newspaper Bouchair said that the commission so far had intervened to get one political party to change its television presentation because it directly criticized an individual in the government, something he said the Algerian election law does not allow. He also noted that he had told political parties to stop using President Bouteflika's picture as a backdrop, as that violated the election law's stipulation that symbols of the state not be used for political purposes. Asked in the May 7 interview about his commission's role in preventing election fraud, Bouchair said the commission had been set up late and was hence unable to act on many complaints from the campaign period. He then noted that his commission's job after the election results are announced is to write a final report to the Algerian president. Le Soir d'Algerie newspaper, widely read among

educated Algerians, carried an editorial on May 8 entitled "Impotent Bouchair" that wondered why men like Said Bouchair would take positions that gave them responsibility but no authority and thus let themselves be used by the state. (Comment: the ultimate sign of Bouchair's authority is his office repeatedly expressing to us a willingness to meet the Ambassador only after the Foreign Ministry sends approval for such a meeting in writing. The MFA has so far avoided doing so. End Comment.)

FRAUD: LITTLE DISCUSSED, WIDELY ANTICIPATED

¶3. (C) In our contacts with political parties participating in the electoral process, we have heard few specific complaints in the past week. The May 10 edition of L'Expression reported that Islamist MSP party leader Aboujerrah Soltani publicly accused the major ruling parties (meaning the FLN and RND) of actively coordinating with election administrations to fix election counts. In private with us, however, MSP officials have worried more about disinterest in the elections than about problems during the campaign itself.

¶4. (C) Lakhdar Benkhellaf, an MP closely associated with the conservative Islamist Abdallah Djaballah whom the Interior Ministry blocked from standing for election (reftel), told us the May 17 elections would bring about no change so long as the voters and political parties are "muzzled and gagged." Algerians of all backgrounds and persuasions, insisted Benkhellaf, should be able to run for election, he complained. The only partial bright spot for Benkhellaf was that the Ministry of Interior, in a decision which we have

confirmed, will permit political party lists at the polls to display photos of candidates alongside their names. He and others had hoped that party symbols would also be allowed. In any event, allowing pictures will be of benefit to illiterate voters who otherwise may not be able to read the ballot on their own.

¶5. (C) The secular opposition party Rally for Culture and Democracy Party (RCD), through its spokesman Mouhcene Belabas, told us its top priority as an opposition party was to ensure that the elections were fair and transparent, because this was the starting point for genuine change. Nothing good would come from efforts to build democracy in Algeria if the people were not vigilant and involved in the process, according to Belabas.

¶6. (C) The left-wing Workers' Party, which many political observers expect to emerge as the largest opposition party, said through its spokesman, Abdelhamid Boubaghla, that it aimed to improve the social and economic living standards of Algerians as well as protect Algerian interests (as opposed to foreign interests). Boubaghla did not, however, express concerns about the electoral process itself. (Comment: Workers' Party leader Louisa Hanoun is pounding on the United States as part of her standard campaign speech. One of her favorite themes is that the U.S. is manipulating terrorism in Algeria to press the Algerian government to accept an American base on Algerian soil. The Ambassador expects to be able to respond to this indirectly in a scheduled May 13 press interview. End Comment.)

WILL ALGERIANS BOTHER TO VOTE ?

¶7. (C) Our Algerian contacts across different socio-economic groups and regions claim that voting in Algeria changes nothing. Most expect one of the two largest political parties, the National Liberation Front (FLN) or National Rally for Democracy (RND), to win the most seats. No one expects the presidential coalition parties -- RND, FLN, and the Islamist MSP -- to garner less than 60 percent of the vote. In this sense, the results of the elections for most

Algerians are a foregone conclusion. Nouredine Ait Messaoudene, executive director of the MSP party, told us his party was concerned that the turnout on May 17 would be very low, especially in urban areas, representing a real setback for Algerian democracy. A senator from Blida, a city south of Algiers, told Ambassador May 9 that he expected very low turnout - perhaps only a quarter of voters from his city. The public, he opined, found little interesting among any of the parties on the campaign trail. L'Expression on May 10 called the election campaign "morose" and said political leaders with their wild promises take Algerian voters to be idiots.

¶8. (C) The parliament itself comes under criticism too. One professor commenting to us on the disinterest in the campaign called the parliament a weak institution that does whatever the executive desires. Most Algerians with whom we speak believe the local elections planned for fall will be far more important to the daily lives of ordinary Algerians.

¶9. (C) One young Algerian entrepreneur representing a U.S. information technology firm told us everyone he talked to was unenthusiastic about the upcoming elections. He said, "People just don't care or think the elections will be credible." The lack of political participation and general malaise among political parties made it appear as though Algeria had returned to the 1980s, in his view. This was very troubling, because any Algerian who grew up in that decade, he maintained, was aware of the turmoil that followed in the 1990s. Another business figure in information technology with strong connections to the military confirmed that "people are not at all interested" in the elections. He predicted a very low voter turnout and said the election "charade" was very discouraging. The political parties, to his dismay, were not offering any new ideas. The press, likewise, did not offer a good forum for free and fair debate.

FRANCE'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAPTURED MORE ATTENTION

¶10. (C) Perhaps most telling in our conversations of recent days is that Algerians have been far more interested and passionate about discussing with us the French presidential election results. Many Algerians with whom we have spoken believe Sarkozy's election as president of France is more significant for Algeria than the parliamentary elections of May 17. One driver waiting outside a restaurant expressed no interest at all in the Algerian elections but spoke for ten minutes about Sarkozy and his disappointment at his election. Like most Algerians, he perceives Sarkozy as anti-Algerian, citing the president-elect's opposition to a bilateral Friendship Treaty and perceived harsh statements against Algerians living in France. One of our Algerian business contacts in the IT field commented that the French presidential election captured Algerians' attention due to the televised debates about social issues in France. By contrast, in Algeria "sycophants" of the military establishment were simply rounding up votes for their positions. He expressed concern that the situation in Algeria today was worse than in the 1980s or 1990s because civil society and open debate were less evident today.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) It is interesting that so few political parties, including serious opponents of the government, have complained much about constraints holding them back during the election campaign itself. The government consciously decided to equalize media time between the larger, more organized political parties and the small political parties (Algerians call these tiny parties 'sanafir,' an Arabic word meaning dwarfs). That decision, and the dismal quality of most parties' public outreach, has lowered the quality of

debate. Notably, political parties have not taken advantage of major scandals like the Khalifa bank to castigate the government effectively. The parliament's history of not challenging the government eroded its credibility and reduced public interest. Finally, election commission head Bouchair's mediocre reassurances, and the history of government manipulation of vote counts, has further eroded public confidence in the process. It remains to be seen how great the voter turnout will be. Many Algerians will vote, but we think many more will not either because they don't want to take the time or because not voting itself will be an act of protest. We expect that in any case the government will inflate the turnout numbers. Above all, what is clear so far is that the election has not given Algerians new confidence in the Algerian political process. Indeed, one Islamist opposition parliamentarian worried that there would be less political space after the elections.

FORD